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Martz makes Superfund request official

The Associated Press

HELENA — Gov. Judy Martz has sent the Environmental Protection Agency her official request to list the city of Libby on the agency's Superfund national priority cleanup list.

"The Libby asbestos site presents the greatest danger to public health or welfare or the environment of the known Superfund facilities in Montana," Martz wrote in her let-

ter, dated Monday, to EPA regional officials in Denver.

The letter follows through on Martz's commitment made just before Christmas to use Montana's one-time "silver bullet" privilege, which is the right of each state to put one Superfund project on a fast track, bypassing public comment periods so the cleanup can begin more quickly.

W.R. Grace & Co. operated Libby's now-defunct vermiculite mine, which is being blamed for nearly 200 deaths

and health problems of hundreds of other area residents.

Newspaper reports in 1999, led by The Daily Inter Lake, first linked health problems in Libby to the mine, which closed in 1990.

The mine's vermiculite ore, which was used to make household products including insulation, contained harmful tremolite asbestos.

The EPA, which has been working in Libby on an emergency basis for about two years, already has spent about \$32 mil-

lion testing areas around town and removing contaminated soils and mine waste.

A final EPA decision on listing Libby sites in the Superfund program is likely by June.

In the meantime, the governor is asking that the EPA continue to pay for ongoing work in Libby. She is asking federal officials to employ local workers when possible, and ensure the work proceeds quickly.

"I am particularly concerned about the amount of time

Superfund takes and any perceived stigma potentially affecting real estate and financial transactions," Martz wrote.

The EPA has said it believes cleanup of the town will take no more than three years. Cleanup of the mine is expected to take longer.

Under a Superfund listing, Montana is to pay no more than 10 percent of the overall cleanup cost. Based on EPA estimates, the state's likely bill would be \$3 million to \$5 million.